THE BIRTH OF THE DIVINE CHILD

WALTER LOWRIE

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A CHRISTMAS SERMON FOR THE SIMPLE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION FOR THE WISE

BY

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INTRODUCTION

THE sermon that follows was preached last Christmas in S. Paul's American Church, Rome. Some complained that it was too long —as indeed it was for that occasion and for those who could not be interested in such a theme. But others of a different quality (of such a quality that I could not ignore their counsel) were insistent that the sermon be published, and I was persuaded to make an exception 'more unique than rare,' overcoming at once both the reluctance of indolence and a greater reluctance due to doubt. For in more than thirty years of preaching I have written only two sermons, and the authority of those who now persuade me to write and publish this discourse does not quite overcome my doubt whether they are justified in their opinion that the considerations I here urge in favor of myth are likely to have the effect of reconciling contrasted views upon questions which are now the subject of bitter

controversy. I here put this opinion to the test,—doubtful of the verdict, but convinced for my own part that the considerations here presented are important as well as true. The chief aim of this Introduction is to show that they have a wider bearing than the Sermon suggests.

There is nothing very novel in what I have to say. I should be the last to assert such a claim. For it is a long time since I began to apprehend how large a place is made for myth in the Christian cult. Thirty years ago when I was interesting myself in Christian archaeology I observed many instances of a singular interest in the sun, and I remarked upon some of them in the popular compendium I wrote some years later. Then, in 1913, the sesquimillennial commemoration of the Edict of Milan, in a lecture on Constantine the Great which I delivered before many of the societies of the Archaeological Institute of America (but did not publish) I found a convenient occasion for treating this curious phenomenon more fully, if not quite completely. For Constantine's interest in

such matters was so great that one must doubt if he clearly distinguished Christianity from sun worship. Nothing could have been more congenial to him than the celebration of Christmas on the 25th of December—the commemoration of the birth of Christ on the Festival of the Unconquered Sun—and, although we find the first reference to this custom in the reign of his son Constantius, I suspect that he himself was the originator of it.

When the northern peoples were converted to Christianity they still further adorned the Christmas festival with the sun myths peculiar to their religions. Or rather, by practices peculiar to them, since the myth itself was universal. Before long the myth evaporated, and there remains to us only the *practices*—cult of the tree, the mistletoe, etc. It is an instance of the 'irrational' in religion that this residual cult is still precious, to adults as well as to children, even while it remains unexplained; but in many talks to children at Christmas I have observed how ready they are to be interested in the explanation of the myth.

On Christmas Day 1913 I talked in this way to adults, but in a more stately tone and with a reasoned justification of the use of myth. The occasion was the unveiling of the mosaic picture of the Nativity on the west wall of our Church. This discourse was printed as an aid to such as sought an interpretation of our mosaics, and during this current year it has been repeated in a little book (*Fifty years of S. Paul's within the walls*) printed only for lovers of this Church, as a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of its consecration. But commonly I have not used the festival of the Nativity as an occasion for speaking about things which are not central to our faith but only picturesque additions to it, having only a 'parasitical sublimity,'—according to Ruskin's quaint definition. Commonly I have chosen the season of Epiphany for developing such themes as this, commenting first of all upon the legendary character of the story of the Magi. For if this story is not actually legendary, we have always treated it as if it were. From age to age we have freely adapted it to our purposes.

The Middle Ages invented the Three Kings, representative of the three races of men. Many are unaware that S. Matthew does not indicate the number, and they would feel that the story had lost its glamor if there were only two (as in some early pictures) and if they represented only one religion and one race of men. A modern writer has invented, with good reason, 'The Fourth Wise Man.'

Two years ago, when I treated the theme of myth with more fulness than usual, my Epiphany sermon was more than usually appreciated, and the encouragement I then received to print it had doubtless some influence in determining me to make of it a Christmas sermon. Eduard Norden's admirable book, 'Die Geburt des Kindes,' was published just in time (1924) to suggest to me an apt text.

There is an obvious tactical advantage (I say it without shame) in beginning such a sermon with such a text. But (in spite of the precedents mentioned in the following sermon, and the many more that might be cited) I would hardly have been bold enough

to use the Fourth Eclogue of Virgil in this connection until a philologist of the rank of Norden had vindicated its religious character and pointed out its relations with ancient myth. For it has long been the fashion for philologists to assume that this prophecy of the poet must have referred to some trivial historical character,—without thinking it worth while to enquire what might have been meant by the Sibyl. This showed bad taste and a lack of humor,—such as those commentators display who seek to interpret in an all-too-human sense Isaiah's prophecy of the Child whose name shall be called Immanuel. Acknowledging in general terms my debt to Norden, I feel free to borrow from his book whatever serves my purpose, accepting as certain what he has proved, and as plausible much that he has suggested. A sermon, like a sonnet, affords a too narrow plot of ground for arguing positions like these.

What I have to say about myth will perhaps not be accepted as irenical. It will doubtless fail to satisfy either of the high contending parties,—and it may be that there

are no others who will be interested. But at least it cannot justly be regarded as negative or destructive. To me it affords a calm solution of a problem which vexes many. And yet it is no compromise, though it avoids opposite extremes and may seem to some dangerous or despicable on that account. Those to whom either extreme seems perilous should be generous enough to note that, however closely these perils are approached, they are always avoided. But for my own part, I have not sought the safe way but the true.

It is far from my purpose to exalt myth and legend above history, or even to put them on the same plane. I would vindicate for them, however, a high place—on a par with dogma and cult, as equally apt *expressions* of religious faith, even of Christian faith.

I have no patience with any of the various attempts to dissolve Christ or Christianity into myth. Christianity is essentially an historical religion—much more profoundly so than Judaism or any other of the so-called 'positive' religions. For though the proper object of religion is the Divine—which is

super-historical—our religious vision actually centers in an historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, through whom we know God. St. Paul gives expression (half dogmatic and half mystical) to the common Christian faith when he says, "In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9). Other religions can claim to be historical only in a secondary sense, as traceable to a remote antiquity and to historic founders,—founders, however, who stood to one side and proclaimed that God is God and they are only His prophets, that they themselves are not the Light but are come to bear witness to the Light. 'To remind people in an eloquent manner of the existence of God,' is the scornful phrase Ruskin uses to describe the function of the Christian ministry. I am not ashamed to accept that description, for it describes justly the part played even by the historic founders of religions,—by Moses and all the Prophets of Israel, by Zarathustra, by Mohammed, and, in a certain sense, even by Gautama Buddha, who at least had no thought of putting himself in the place of

the divinity which he ignored. Only the mythical founders were conceived to do more than this. The only exception among historical founders (so far as they were not plainly deceivers or self-deceived) was Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Narrow and brief was the influence of false prophets after the type of Simon Magus, who 'gave out that himself was some great one,' an emanation of God known as 'the Great Power.' And yet, according to the most authentic records, Jesus himself, if he did not clearly claim the title of Christ, avoided it only because (like 'son of David') he counted it inadequate; and it cannot reasonably be supposed that he would have regarded as too high for him the mystical epithets 'Lord' and 'Saviour.'

I take no offence at the fact that these titles were associated with contemporary mystery cults and ultimately with mythical religions. If that is an objection, it bears also against the title Christ. For the Messianic idea was not original to Judaism but was one of the gifts of the Magi. And, essentially, apocalyptic eschatology is nothing else but

myth oriented towards the future. That was the distinction of the Zoroastrian myth. But even the myths which originally were oriented in the opposite sense (as fictitious histories) were by the Church valued as *prophecies* which were conceived to be fulfilled in Jesus. The eschatological myth can be denounced as unreal only in the event that its expectations remain unrealized. It may be said that the 'historical' myth is unreal in a more precise sense, forasmuch as it corresponds to no actual event or historical character in the past to which it purports to relate. Yet even so it possesses reality in the fact that it corresponds to a real human need and desire. And it gains another sort of reality when the human need that inspired it finds tardily its apt correspondence in an historical character. Jesus *was* the Christ, he *was* Lord and Saviour. Such titles affirm the value which men sought and found and acclaimed in Jesus, without detracting in the least from His historical reality or distorting seriously the outlines of His human character. The Canonical Gospels guaranteed that. The first genera-

tion of disciples was so securely anchored in the reminiscence of Jesus that they scented no danger in the application to Him of mythical titles or in the adornment of His story with legendary *motifs;* but when the danger became clear this tendency was sharply checked, the apochryphal (legendary) Gospels were discarded, and with the support of the historical Gospels Christianity survived the two critical centuries which threatened to dissolve it into myth. Before Constantine's conversion the danger was past, and again myth could safely be treated as an ally rather than as an enemy. One may think that it has been too much used, or even greatly abused, but no sober historian will affirm that during the sixteen hundred years last past it has jeopardized or obscured the historical character of Christianity.

Many religions—by far the greater number—have expressed themselves only in myth and cult. On the one hand, myth serves as an explanation of the cult, on the other hand, as an explanation of the universe. That is to say, it serves the same ends as dogma, and

it serves them so completely that in a characteristically mythical religion there is no place left for anything else. Christianity is essentially dogmatic for the reason that it is essentially historical. One can dogmatize only about facts. So essentially is it dogmatic that in Christendom anti-dogmatists are compelled to formulate anti-dogmas—they propose a different valuation of the facts. But alongside of dogma the historical religion can admit myth and legend as easily as it can admit prophecy. The only condition is that they must bear upon the facts.

Beside myth and cult and dogma there are no other mediums of religious expression. For music is clearly an adjunct to the cult, and the architectural and pictorial arts have no other proper purpose in religion except for the adornment of the temple and for the illustration of the myth. Some will object that there are also historical religious pictures, and I will not contend about that further than to say that if they are merely historical—pass no judgment and appraise no values—they are clearly felt to be unreligious. Those

who condemn myth and abjure dogma and go about to eliminate the cult are left without any means of expressing their religion or communicating it. It is difficult to believe that they can even hold it securely in their own embrace. But as a matter of fact, if 'truth in closest words' be dogma, the rationalist is more prone than others to dogmatize; the least ritualistic must recognize the necessity of a certain minimum of cult for common worship; and we all of us rely more than we are commonly willing to admit upon myth and legend as expressions of our faith,—upon 'truth embodied in a tale' which enters 'in at lowliest doors.'

It is only when we begin to reflect upon it that we feel an uneasy conscience at employing this last means of expression. Many have a very bad conscience indeed when they begin to suspect that there are legendary and mythological features even in the historical Gospels, conceiving that they must either accept them as sheer history or reject them altogether. This is a very modern dilemma because the idea of *sheer* history is new. In

our language we have no word to distinguish this from the ancient idea of history as a tale fitly adorned to awake the impression of truth as the narrator subjectively apprehends it. The Germans have lately adopted the term '*Historie*' to distinguish from mere *Geschichte* the modern idea of history as the precise and adequate counterpart of past events. We hardly feel the need of a special word for this because we use 'history' as if it could mean only *this*, the apprehension of the historical 'thing in itself.' This view of sheer history may be sound so far as it applies to sheer facts, but it is a presumptuous delusion to suppose that human souls and all their experiences are facts of this sort. Our experiences are made up chiefly of judgments of value. Therein consists their reality as experiences. And no history can report them adequately which ignores the express character of this reality.

I regard this idea of historicity as a greater danger than the effort made in narrow circles to explain away Christ as a myth. For though the 'mythical theory' has at this mo-

ment a wide and popular echo it is too plainly a paradox to be a danger; whereas our modern age as a whole, including the two extremes of opposition within the Church, has completely succumbed to the fallacy of sheer history. Our Liberals and our Fundamentalists, being essentially modern, both of them, are both tarred with the same stick. To use a French phrase which applies so frequently that it deserves to become proverbial, 'The more they differ, the more they prove to be *la même chose*.' They share the same misunderstanding of history, along with the same misunderstanding of myth, and the same fear or dislike of it. They differ only in the fact that the one party would reject all myth in favor of sheer history, while the other feels constrained to accept as sheer history whatever myth it finds in the Holy Scriptures. If we are determined to accept nothing as true in any sense which is not presented to us as sheer history or as sheer science, we are logically compelled to reject, not only myth and cult, but dogma and philosophy and poetry and art. With that goes religion,—

for all these things go together,—and it ought to be clear that when religion is reduced to pure history it ceases to be religion. The loss of any one of these things might be tolerable (even the loss of religion), but one cannot lack them all and be a man. We are capable, fortunately, of doing what is logically impossible, but the state of poetry and art in our day proves how broadly potent is the tendency of logic.

From these general considerations I return to my main contention, that myth can be safely used if it is used rightly, according to its own nature and not according to the nature of some other thing,—*e.g.*, history. In this connection I am not inclined to inquire what mythical or legendary elements may be discovered in the historical Gospels or in any other part of the Scriptures. Here I am thinking rather of the very manifest myths which we have freely elected to use for the adornment of our religion. No one can ignore the fact that the festival of Christmas in particular is richly embroidered with myth and legend,—legend being defined as the

naïve and popular tale which in a later age replaced (and in another form preserved) the original hieratic myth. Under this thick embroidery many fail to discern the material on which it is woven. The austere dogma of the Incarnation seems to them incompatible with the 'gay religions full of pomp and gold,' of jollity also and frolic, which characterize our cult of the Christmas tree. The cult of Christmas would not be much affected by the demonstration that Jesus was a myth, since its substratum is confessedly myth; and doubtless there are devotees who celebrate Christmas without Christ. I do not grudge them in the least the comfort they derive from the vague sentiment prompted by the observance of the legendary Christmas ceremonies, if that is the utmost they can reach. But I do not wonder that the austere Puritans, scenting danger in this, resolved to abolish Christmas together with all its pretty but trivial observances. I wonder rather that in their time they succeeded in this rude violation of human nature. For so natural are these things, so correspondent to human in-

stinct, that the descendants of the Puritans have everywhere built up again (commonly without the Divine Child) what their ancestors tore down,—thus confessing the sin of their fathers, who inadvertently had 'emptied out the baby with the bath.' The bare dogma of the Incarnation proved not so apprehensible—not even so communicable —as the myth.

I have no sympathy for a recent school which would substitute 'value judgments' for history. Many were constrained to that attitude by their fond belief in sheer history. But now that this threat of danger has receded, the phrase, 'value judgment,' remains to us as the expression of a very precious perception, if we will use it rightly. For judgments of value are, in fact, an important part of our mental operations. Ethical judgments, in particular, are commonly perceived to be judgments of value. All religious affirmations which go beyond the statement of plain matter of fact are evidently expressions of the value we discover in the religious object. Such 'truth' as we can claim for our

dogmas (or for our ethical judgments) is a different sort of thing from the 'truth' which pretends merely to define an historical or empirical fact. It is truth of a different but by no means of an inferior quality, being intent rather upon *reality* than upon mere precision of representation. It is the sort of truth the Hebrew language indicated by the word 'amen' (reality), which accordingly St. John had in mind whenever he used the words 'true' and 'truth.' 'Honesty is good' expresses a conviction of absolute value, whether or no it proves also to be the best policy. 'Jesus is Lord' (or any other dogmatic statement to the same effect) is an expression of the value we attach to the historical Jesus. To all this everyone will agree, and I assert it here only in order to point out that, in an historical religion like Christianity, myth serves the same purpose as dogma,—in some respects more perfectly, in others less so. It expresses a value judgment—in this case the value of the historical Jesus. Very different, of course, is the use of myth in a mythical religion; for we cannot, properly

speaking, appraise any value in things which do not exist.

For my part I heartily prize the Christmas myths. I like them all the better for the fact that they establish with ancient and remote religions a sympathetic bond, though it be only a formal one. For all that, I am not a partisan of the 'School of Historical Religion',—least of all am I enamoured of that myopic tendency which, with attention riveted upon words, fails to perceive that in their new connection they acquire a totally different character and value. If it could be clearly shown that all the *ideas* of Christianity were supplied by mythical religions, that would be a grave disparagement of the originality of Jesus, but it would not altogether invalidate the claim of the Church to be a uniquely historical religion. For at least all these ideas were for the first time centered in one person, and for the first time associated with a real man. I state here an extreme supposition, manifestly contrary to fact, in order to introduce the reflection that if Christianity had been merely a syncretic religion, it would

have had no chance of survival as against competitors which were more frankly and wholly and perfectly syncretic. As a matter of fact its central ideas were original though the words that expressed them were old.

Though not many years have elapsed since the death of my revered teacher Hermann Cremer, discoveries have been made in language and religion which exact a revision of his view of the language of the New Testament as the language of the Holy Ghost. A *revision* of it and not its rejection, as it seems to me. For it was certainly not his meaning that the New Testament language was created out of nothing; and if the sources of it (in the *koine* and in the mystical syncracy) are now more clearly revealed than heretofore, the moulding the old words underwent is no less clear. I am not scandalized at discovering that several of the key words of the New Testament trace their origin to ancient mythological conceptions. It might rather be thought a providential dispensation that, whatever image and superscription they bear, they had become current

coin throughout the Empire, a universal religious language. Christianity needed a universal tongue, and apart from the words of Old Testament coinage there were no other terms but these available for the expression of the value which the Church discovered in and through Jesus of Nazareth. What all men everywhere had longed for, that the Church had to offer,—and it offered it appropriately in the very words expressive of that universal longing. The use of such words was rendered the more obvious and inevitable by the fact that they had associations with the Old Testament. Of such words it might justly be said that they were 'not words which man's wisdom teacheth, but words which the Spirit teacheth,' and in the use of them St. Paul might well feel that he was 'matching spiritual experiences with spiritual words' (1 Cor. 2:13). St. Paul's aversion to the mystery cults makes it certain that he was not inclined to adopt their ideas or lightly to use the words they had appropriated. In fact, the Church adopted but few words from such sources, but they were

the most significant words. To the use of them there was only the one alternative of inventing a new and mechanical language devoid of all feeling and religious association.

The foregoing reflections suggest an immense extension of the simple theme I essayed to deal with in my sermon. But it all hangs together. Every one of the 'pagan' terms appropriated by Christianity from the universal language of mystical syncretism (whether akin to Old Testament terms or not) is an abbreviation or a vestige of ancient myth. Such, for example, are Kyrios, Soter, Pneuma—the Lord, the Saviour, the Spirit. Not only so, but we can detect the mythological origin of the apocalyptic eschatology which was incorporated at a comparatively late date in the tradition of Israel and was so highly valued by Jesus. The fact that it is stamped with His approval creates a new problem for us. Or rather it renders the old problem of myth more difficult for the fact that we cannot lightly get rid of it. But we ourselves are responsible for conceiving this problem in a harsh form which permits

of no solution. We ask ourselves if the apocalyptic vision is 'true'—in the sense of sheer history, meaning an accurate prevision of events which have already occurred or are about to occur. But there is a manifest absurdity in applying strictly an historical criterion to prophecy. It would seem as if only an enemy could exact of prophecy a literal and punctual fulfilment, for there could be no more effective *reductio ad absurdum*. If the gift of prophecy is to be made plausible at all, it must be regarded as a vague apprehension, presentiment, awareness, of things which lie not wholly in the future but are already obscurely present in reality:

> *'Fallings from us, vanishings,*
> *Blank misgivings of a creature*
> *Moving about in worlds not realized.'*

Such intimations are most aptly presented in symbolical and pictorial forms. This is apocalyptic. And we cannot even require that its symbols should be *adequately* expressive when its object is the unutterable (2 Cor. 12:4) and the unknowable (Mk. 13:32).

With this last word ("But of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father") Jesus put apocalyptic in its right place. From a very different point of view Albert Schweitzer remarks upon the paradox that Jesus put an end to apocalyptic eschatology. For its fantasies there remained no more room when an historical figure filled the canvas. What remained was the decisive orientation of our religion towards the future. So permanent was this impression that we find it difficult now to conceive of a religion which does not chiefly express itself as Hope.

I have ventured to express here certain perceptions which 'the ignorant and unstead-fast' might wrest to their own destruction, concluding in a negative sense that, as the pagan gods are 'nothing in the world' and their myths are vain imaginations, so also are the very terms in which the dogma is expressed. ΙΧΘΥΣ (the mystic Fish) is the summary of our mythical religion, being the anagram of Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Ὑιός Σωτήρ,

among which titles only the one name Jesus is (perhaps) historical, while Christ, Son of God, and Saviour are mythical to the core. So one must conclude who has no apprehension of a unique value in Jesus. But whoso finds his own conviction expressed in the briefest dogmatic formula Iesus Xristos Kurios (Jesus Christ the Lord), and counts that inadequate; who finds the Nicene dogma of the Incarnation more apt yet still inadequate; he will be inclined to prize in the myths and legends of Christmas a real expression of value in another *genre*.

Having finished this 'Introduction,' I realize that it might be more profitably read after *the Sermon. If it has been read first, it might well be read a second time. If these aphorisms are true, they are worthy of more than one reading: if one suspects that they are false, he has still more reason for reading them again, that he may detect clearly where they are in error.*

THE BIRTH OF THE DIVINE CHILD: A CHRISTMAS SERMON

THE TEXT

So much of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue as is pertinent to this use, in a translation freely adapted to this occasion and briefly commented upon.

"SICILIAN Muses, let us sing a loftier strain. If our song must be of sylvan things, let them be such as are worthy of a consul.

"Now, according to the prophecy of the Cumean Sibyl, the last age comes to an end. After the end follows another beginning, a cycle of new centuries. Justice returns, and the Saturnian reign; a new race will be sent down from heaven. 'If only thou, pure Lucina (*helper in child-birth*) wilt favor the birth of the Child, with whom the iron age shall come to an end and a golden race spring up throughout the world. Thine own Apollo

reigns' (*i.e., the Sun God, brother of Lucina-Diana*).

"In thy consulship, Pollio, shall this glorious age commence and the great months of the new world era begin to run their course; under thy sway will the last traces of our guilt be obliterated and the earth freed from perpetual terror. That Child shall receive the gift of divine life . . . and by his father's power become a prince of peace to the whole earth.

"But for thee, dear Child, shall the earth untilled pour forth as her first little gifts at thy cradle all lovely flowers. The goats uncalled shall bring their milk, and the herds will not fear great lions; serpents shall be no more, nor poisonous herbs. As soon as thou canst read the praise of heroes and thy father's deeds and know what valour is, slowly the plain will wave with yellow corn, brambles will yield purple grapes, and the hard oak distil honey dew. Some traces, however, of ancient evil will still remain: the peasant must labour in the sweat of his brow, the merchant must risk his life upon the sea, and cities must

be protected still with walls; there shall also be other wars, and another great Achilles will be sent again to Troy.

"When, however, thou art grown from youth to man's estate, able to bear rule, then none will any longer have to barter or strive; every land shall produce all kinds of fruits, the earth shall not feel the furrow, nor the vine the pruning knife; the oxen shall be loosed from the yoke. Wool need no longer counterfeit brilliant hues, but of himself the ram in the meadows shall tinge his fleece, now to sweetly blushing purple, now to yellow, and scarlet of its own accord shall clothe the grazing lambs.

" 'Such ages as these, come quickly,' cried to their spindles the Fates, voicing in unison the fixed will of Destiny. Enter on thy career—the hour is come,—dear progeny of the gods, great offspring of Jupiter. Behold how the whole world—heaven, and earth and sea—rocks to and fro! how all things exult in the coming Aeon.

"Begin, baby boy, to recognize thy mother with a smile. Begin, baby boy!"

You may demand of me an apology for beginning a Christmas sermon with a pagan text. But we are in Rome, and I quote a Latin poet whom Dante regarded as a prophet and revered as a guide. In the *Purgatorio* (XXII. 64-73) he refers expressly to this poem, when he makes the poet Statius say to Virgil,

> *Thou show'dst me first the way*
> *To scale Parnasus and to taste its spring,*
> *And then enlightened me, next after God.*
>
> *Behaving like a guide who goes by night,*
> *Holding a lamp behind which serves him not,*
> *But renders wise the man who follows on,—*
>
> *So thou didst say: 'The age renews itself,*
> *Justice returns, and the first state of man,*
> *And a new progeny descends from heaven.'*
>
> *Through thee I became poet,—Christian too.*

There are precedents more ancient than this and more strictly ecclesiastical. Constantine had this Eclogue translated into Greek, that he might read it to the bishops assembled in the first ecumenical council, that of Nicea,

believing that it had a bearing upon the decision they were called upon to make as touching the doctrine of the Incarnation. Pope Innocent III. cited this poem in a Christmas sermon preached in the year 1200. *Teste David cum Sibyla* is a well known reference to it in a famous medieval hymn—'David being witness along with the Sibyl' of the divinity of the infant Jesus. And you who are in Rome have likely seen Rafael's frescoes in the church of Sta. Maria della Pace, where the Cumean Sibyl is identified by the Virgilian phrase, *Jam nova progenies*—'Now a new race of men.'

But there followed a long period when prosaic commentators,

> *The mighty scholiasts whose immortal pains*
> *Made Horace dull and humbled Virgil's strains,*

persuaded the world that the poet probably meant nothing in particular, certainly nothing sublime. And I might not have been bold enough to treat this as a Christmas text, had not a distinguished German philologist published last year a book which vindicates the

religious character of this Eclogue and connects it with a venerable and all but universal myth,—disposing forever of the notion that this Divine Child was a son of Pollio, or some such thing. Pollio was a supporter of Mark Antony and a patron of Virgil. The year of his consulate was 40 A.D. The poet's prophecy of peace was not then fulfilled. The Sibyl's verses on which it was founded can only be vaguely inferred, for the text has not been preserved. It is not likely that they indicated this particular year. One must suppose that Virgil made this application, presenting the poem to his patron on the first day of January when he solemnly assumed the consulate. He could then say, 'Already Apollo reigns,' for the 25th of December (the winter solstice according to the Ptolemaic calendar) was celebrated as the Birth Day of the Sun,—here regarded, not as the beginning of a common year, but of a new cycle of centuries, the first of which, a new golden age, was to be under the regiment of the Sun. The birth of the Child was soon to follow—on the 6th of January, we may

suppose; for that date (which at an early time was observed by the Church as the anniversary of the birth of Christ) had first been celebrated in Egypt (about 2000 B.C., at the founding of Thebes) as the winter solstice and the Birthday of the Aeon.

This brief scholium must suffice as a comment upon Virgil's prophecy. As a text for today I prefer to present it in a brief but faithful summary: "The time is fulfilled! The birth of a divine Child is at hand! He is destined to cancel the sin which holds the world in bondage, and to introduce a new race of men for whom a new age of peace and righteousness is about to dawn. Hence all the world exults with joy, in heaven and in earth." If I had not told you where this prophecy is found, you might well suppose that it is a free rendering of the prophecies which adorn the first pages of St. Luke's Gospel. "Hail, thou that art highly favored! The Lord is with thee! Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God. And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and

bear a Son and shalt call his name Jesus (*Saviour*). He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David, and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Lk. 1:28-34). It is not a substantial difference that Virgil ascribes these good tidings to an inspired prophetess, whereas St. Luke puts them in the mouth of an angel. Of course in the one case there is the coloring of Greek mythology, and in the other specific references to the tradition of Israel. It is a curious fact, moreover, that Virgil uses the singular name for god (*deus*), and that St. Luke's expression, 'the Most High,' was not a name appropriated to the God of Israel. Bucolic imagery belonged to the style of an eclogue, but it emerges also in the account of the angels appearing to the shepherds that were keeping watch over their flocks by night. "Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all peoples, for there is born to you this day in the city

of David a Saviour which is Christ the Lord. And this is a sign unto you: Ye shall find a Babe wrapped in swadling clothes and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men in whom he is well pleased" (Lk. 2: 10-13). In our picture of the Nativity we have added something to the pastoral imagery by introducing the ox and the ass along with the sheep and shepherds at the manger. Such embellishments are indeed not foreign to the spirit of that story,—nor is the cult of the Virgin Mother, which is already adumbrated in St. Luke's sources. In the familiar pictures of Isis holding in her arms the infant Horus (Harpocrates, the divine bambino) the early Church had ready to hand a perfect model for its representations of the Mother and Child. That too was part of the myth which Virgil's verses refer to,—evidently assuming that everyone will understand who is this 'babe,' this 'little babe,' so casually mentioned yet with such emphasis,

the very center of his prophecy, as it is of the Gospel story.

One might be tempted to suppose that Virgil had borrowed all this from the Gospels,—if the Gospels had not been written a century later. It involves at least no anachronism to suggest that he borrowed from Isaiah. "Jahve himself shall give you a sign. Behold the Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son and shall call his name Immanuel (*God-with-us*). Butter and honey shall he eat. . . . Before the Child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good the land whose two kings thou abhorrest shall be forsaken" (7:14-16). "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light, they that dwelt in the valley of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased their joy; they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, thou hast broken as in the day of Midian. . . . For unto us a Child is born,

unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with judgment and with righteousness from henceforth and forever" (9:2-7). "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard with the kid; the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the basilisk's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of Jahve as the waters cover the sea" (11:6-9).

In this last passage Isaiah gives a bucolic picture of peace much like that of Virgil, except that here the noxious beasts are con-

verted instead of destroyed. This difference is enough to dispel the fond fancy that Virgil, or the Sibyl before him, has borrowed from the Hebrew Prophet. How then can we account for the many liknesses but by supposing a common origin in the remote past? And in fact, by gathering up fragments here and there which have been scattered along the centuries, it is possible to piece together the essential elements of an ancient and well nigh universal myth of a divine Sun Child. And what could the story of the Magi mean but that Sun worshippers were seeking the Sun Child, guided by an astral sign? Malachi prophesied (4: 2), "The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings, and ye shall gambol for sheer joy." St. John who turns everything into allegory affirms, "This is the true Light that lighteth every man, now coming into the world."

You yourselves will recall many a detail of the eschatological picture fantastically painted in the Gospels, in elaboration of the brief announcement, "The kingdom of God is at hand." You will remember the still

more elaborate picture given in the Apocalypse of that kingdom which had not yet come but would surely not tarry long. In spite of the fact that this class of literature appears in Daniel, the latest book of the Old Testament, you may have the feeling that all this is foreign to the tradition of Israel. That suspicion is correct: all this was borrowed from the religion of the Magi, which, inverting the usual orientation of the myth, sought the golden age in the future rather than in the past. In the years of travail which preceded the foundation of the Empire and the coming of Christ, men everywhere were in expectation of a divine Saviour. Perhaps it was only man's need that prompted this faith in all its various expressions. But is not that almost enough to justify it? Man's extremity is God's opportunity. One who counted himself the Antichrist voiced for our generation this same sense of need. He cried, "Man is a thing that must be surpassed!" Hence he believed in the Superman, the Beyond-man. This is closely akin to the *nova progenies* of Virgil, and not very different, it

seems to me, from the 'new creature,' the 'new man,' of St. Paul.

In the narrow space of a sermon it is not possible for me to offer you convincing proofs of this interpretation of religious history. I can do little more than ask you, 'Has it your vote to be so if it can?' Would you rather believe that the yearning after a divine Saviour was characteristic of one race alone (the race of Jacob, in which you have no share by blood), and that the expectation of His coming was the exclusive prerogative of Israel?—or that all races of men upon the face of the whole earth have been seeking after God, if haply they might feel after Him and find Him; and that to none of them he left himself without a witness, so that something in all ancient religions (including the dear little bambino Horus) found fulfilment in the birth of Jesus? I hope you will prefer the latter alternative, for you may find yourself possessed of a bad conscience if you do not.

While I can speak freely about the sources of the Sibyl's prophecy, I am aware that some

of you may be offended by the suggestion that there might be detected any mythical or legendary element in the Gospels. I am treading on delicate ground, and I am properly fearful of outraging any sincere belief. But though there were no myths in the Christmas story as told in the Canonical Scriptures, you are aware that the mythical and legendary element predominated in very early gospels which are called 'apocryphal,' and no one will deny that our customary celebration of Christmas is richly, riotously, mythical. We have invented myths to supplement what was lacking in the traditional account of Santa Claus, Kris Kringle, and the Christmas tree. The use of the mistletoe, the 'golden bough,' is partly explained by Virgil, in the only other mystical passage of his poems (Aeneid, vi. 137), where again he relies upon the Cumean Sibyl. We have always dealt with the story of the Magi as if it were a myth, freely altering it to suit out purposes. We now celebrate this manifestation (epiphany) to the Gentiles on a day which four thousand years ago (taking

account of the imperfection of ancient calendars) marked the winter solstice; and the date which we celebrate as Christmas (since 360 A.D. at the latest) was the solstice of the Julian calendar, the *Festis Invicti,* Birthday of the Unconquered Sun,—upon which, as Macrobius relates (Sat. I. 18, 9), "The Egyptians carry in procession from a cave-like adyton the statue of a boy, because the sun is then like a young child." As though this was not enough, at the summer solstice we celebrate the birth of John the Baptist, who 'came to bear witness to the Light'; at the spring equinox we celebrate the Annunciation, *i.e.* the conception of the divine Child; and on Sept. 24th (which in old time was the autumn equinox) the calendar of some Churches commemorated the Baptist's declaration, 'He (the true Light) must increase, but I must decrease.' Thus all the decisive moments of the sun's annual course are commemorated in our cult to show that Jesus is the cosmic Saviour.

When the mythical elements in our Christmas celebration are recognized, the question

presses whether they can be justified. We may count that this play is natural enough for children, but is it compatible in adult life with a serious attitude towards religious truths, and towards the doctrine of the Incarnation in particular? The Puritans said, No; and they boldly proposed to abolish Christmas itself along with all its pleasant but trivial observances. In the vulgar language of Hudibras,

They quarrel with mince pies and disparage
Their best and dearest friend, plumb porridge;
Fat pig and goose itself oppose,
And blaspheme custard through the nose.

In the end they succeeded only in suppressing the proper *religious* celebration of Christmas,—and of every other Church festival which they considered tainted by myth. What they drove with a pitchfork out of the door came back through the window,—as everything does which meets a real human need. Perhaps their success might have been complete, if they had had the courage to denounce also the myth that is found in the

Gospels. For it is all of a piece. If we will tell the truth to ourselves, we are not willing to let any of it go. It is all dear to us,—Santa Claus and the Christmas tree not the least.

We are determined to practice all this, but how are we to think about it? If you were asked to tell what a myth is, some of you would reply, very inadequately, that it is a story which is not true. That definition is imperfect, not only because it unjustly disparages myth by confounding it with the far greater number of stories which are both untrue and unprofitable, but also because it uses a criterion which is not properly applicable to myth. It would be absurd to contemn myth because it is not history, for it commonly pretends to be nothing of that sort. It would be still more absurd to assume that myth can have no value as an expression of religion, in view of the fact that, in almost all religions except our own, myth is a favorite means of expression. One might rather count it a defect in the Christian religion that it is so poor in myth. To ask

whether a myth is 'true' is beside the point. Lady Burne-Jones reports the reply of her husband when one who admired the picture of the Annunciation which he made for the triumphal arch of this Church required him to say if he believed the story true. 'It must be true,' said the artist, 'it is so beautiful.' Much to the same effect was Heracleitos' appreciation of myth: 'quite beautiful.' In fact, myth is a form of art, and it rightly seeks to express beauty. That is the sort of 'truth' it aims after. Its close relation to pictorial art might serve to remind us of this. In Christianity, as an historical religion, myth serves a new and peculiar purpose. It expresses a value judgment. Such is the meaning of our composite Christmas myth. It expresses the unique value we discover in Jesus. Who can deny that it expresses it well, and in the only terms which children and adults, the simple and the wise, can use in common? And after all, dogma is not so essentially different from myth as we commonly assume. It too is the expression of a judgment of value, and to the wise, who

understand the symbolical limitations of language, it seems always inadequate,—inadequate not only because of the imperfection of human speech, but because of the greatness of its object. We must count it inadequate even in its noblest expressions: as this of St. John's, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, a glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth"; or this of St. Paul's, "We beheld the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

We must make clear to ourselves that there are just three ways by which men are wont to express their religious judgments and feelings, and that they are all of them expressions of the value which (rightly or wrongly) they attach to the religious object. These three ways are (in the order of their use): ritual worship, myth, and dogma,—art being used most ineptly for the presentation of dogma, but very appropriately for the enhancement of worship and for the illustration of myth. Though they are all alike inadequate ways, they are all right ways,—if only

they be used according to their several natures.

But this is not to say that I apprehend no danger or inconvenience in the gradual accretion of myth about the essential Christian Gospel. Even so much (or so little) as had entered into two of the historical Gospels rendered them vulnerable to the keen shafts of Celsus' criticism, who observed in his 'True Word' that the pagan religions were full of stories of gods begetting half-human sons, and that the wise were by no means proud of such things. We may note that the Church resisted the temptation of mythical adornment during two centuries which threatened to resolve all its dogma and history into myth, as was done by all the Gnostic sects. Origen justly retorted to Celsus that there was a difference: Jesus was an historical man. We are in danger if we lose hold of that. But this is not the chief danger of our day. We are under no necessity of emphasizing, as St. John does, the fact that 'Jesus Christ came *in the flesh,*' and the phrases to this effect in the Apostles' Creed seem to us to

insist unduly upon the historical character of Jesus. But in our day we have formulated a false dilemma: 'Jesus *or* Christ,'—by which we mean the necessity of a choice between history and myth. To a question so falsely put there can be no true answer. If Jesus accounted himself to be the Christ and acted the part, myth (of a sort) is inextricably mingled with the Gospel history. That he did so has been shown in a way entirely convincing to me by Albert Schweitzer's 'criticism,' and I wonder why, for this positive service, he is commonly regarded as a negative critic.

We must make it clear to ourselves that the marvelous stories which have gathered about the birth of Jesus add not one ounce of evidence to the conviction that Jesus is a fit object of our religious devotion. They served in the beginning, and they serve now, merely to express that conviction, which we arrive at by a very different sort of evidence, —whether on traditional grounds, or on rational, or on practical (*i.e.* because we have been taught to believe, or find it reasonable,

or find it good). Myth is more nearly like an act of worship than like a creed.

Yet I reflect again that all this is not without danger. I am thinking now of the danger that the Christmas festival may outlive Christianity,—as it has outlived it in the case of many who frolic merrily today. I do not speak as a kill-joy, bewailing that people should be happy about nothing when they have nothing else to be happy about. I enter heartily into the Christmas play: we had our Christmas tree in the Rectory last night, and here is our *presepio* in the Church. Up to a certain point I can enjoy it all. But I have the defect of enjoying the theatre very little, and consequently am not overfond of the histrionic element in our Catholic worship. In Holy Week and at Easter our observances are influenced by the orgiastic cult of Thamus-Adonis. We pretend that Jesus dies every year, and every year is raised from the dead. And now, 'as at this season,' we pretend that he is born every year. It is possible even for people to pretend that he always has remained the Bambino. It gives me no

pleasure when friends write to me at this season that they will pray to the divine Infant for me. This which the Roman Catholic accepts as traditional orthodoxy is for us as yet mere play—and it is not good play. You may see here a Church dedicated TO THE INFANT GOD. But no infant, though he be divine, is strong enough to save me,—until (as Virgil says) 'he has grown from youth to man's estate and is able to bear rule.' It is well for us to remember that Jesus was born something like nineteen hundred and twenty-five years ago. But it should be impossible for us not to remember also that he grew up, and that in the fulness of his young manhood he died upon the Cross. I am fain even upon Christmas Day to look beyond the symbol of the Incarnation which Burne-Jones has beautifully depicted upon the chancel arch and to remember the strong Man he has stretched upon the 'Tree of Forgiveness' in front of the apse. And beyond that again (for He did not suffer there forever) I look to the universal ruler (Pantocrator, the Greeks call him and represent him more

sternly), who is now enthroned above the worlds and holds the earth in the hollow of his hand. That picture too, in every pictorial detail, is of the stuff that myths are made of. These golden walls of the heavenly Jerusalem are not 'real,' neither is the throne in the midst of it, nor the rainbow about the throne, nor the fourfold river of life which issues from beneath the throne; the seraphs round about the throne are like nothing that anywhere exists, and a human form no longer circumscribes the glorified Christ. Yet in a deeper sense that picture is most real and true. It expresses to me more cogently and more adequately than any dogma the cheerful faith that Jesus Christ really is enthroned above all Principalities and Powers; that He shall reign till He hath put all enemies under His feet; that, in spite of 'the traces of ancient evil' which still remain, He is able to save me and all the world; that He now, as in the 'days of his flesh,' possesses (to use Blake's words)

the human form divine:
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace;

that he can create a new race (*nova progenies*) after his own likeness, and a new earth fit for such inhabitants.

I wonder if Pope Pius XI. was prompted by some such reflections as these to publish, precisely on this Christmas Eve, the encyclical which establishes the new festival of *Christus Rex*.

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